

One Journey Toward Racial Justice: The Power of Me, the Power of We

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I remember being emotionally traumatized when I learned of Trayvon Martin. Then came Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Later, seeing the video of Philando Castille was gut-wrenching. I couldn't even watch the entire eight minute and 46 second video of George Floyd's killing. These stories—these images—of Black men senselessly killed without mercy or grace were filling me with rage. The killing of Black men was nothing new, it was just being captured more because of our access to cell phone cameras. I wondered what goes through the mind of white people when they see Black men? How irrational their fear must be to trigger them to take someone's life with almost no hesitation. How evil. How wretched.

As a Black woman born and raised in Iowa, I know racism quite well. But simply being outraged was not enough. My soul had been wounded. I cried. I prayed. But then I took my rage and channeled it into a determination to create change; real change, lasting change. It was time to take action because as long as I live, I will fight for racial justice for my people at the hands of the police.

But how could I make difference? I found the answer with a social justice organization called Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement (Iowa-CCI). I knew that Iowa-CCI was good at taking action and getting things done. After I had marched in a couple of protests in Des Moines after Michael Brown's killing, I learned from a friend that works at Iowa-CCI that they were planning to take up the issue of racial justice for Black and Brown people. I was 10 minutes early to the first meeting, seated in front. This is when I began to describe myself, among other things, as a community activist.

* I'm a mother of two Black sons, a grandmother, and social justice activist born and raised in Des Moines, Iowa. Currently, I work as a web writer and project manager for Just Voices Iowa (justvoicesiowa.org). It's a non-profit organization that speaks truth and seeks justice by lifting the voices of victims of racially biased policing. I have to thank Hugh Espey and Sharon Zanders-Ackiss of Iowa-CCI for their help with this essay. I am also grateful to Harvey Harrison and my fellow warriors on the Racial Justice Team at Iowa-CCI for their tireless hard work—you all inspire me.

Iowa-CCI was founded in 1975 in Waterloo, Iowa by four Catholic priests who, together with other community residents, saw a need to use community organizing to tackle a variety of justice and democracy issues in low-income neighborhoods. Iowa-CCI has grown into a statewide organization with over 4,000 dues-paying members in almost all of Iowa's 99 counties.

The mission of Iowa-CCI is to empower and unite grassroots people of all races to take control of their communities. We believe that community organizing is the most effective means for engaging people in true democracy to bring about broad, progressive social change. We want to make our communities more just and more humane.

In that first meeting in 2014, I was one of more than 70 individuals. The goal was to learn what issues communities of color were facing and to learn how we could organize around those issues.

The room was filled with conversations, and we broke out in groups. Small group discussions were held to discuss concerns with an expectation to report back to the collective. We listed all the issues and problems facing Black and Brown Iowans. We then discussed and identified the top three and prioritized our concerns. The issues were: racial profiling, jobs/economy, and the racial disproportion of mass incarceration. We agreed to focus first on the issue of racial profiling.

Next, we began to examine how the process of filing a complaint against the Des Moines Police Department (DMPD) worked. Most people told us they never made a complaint because they either didn't know they could, or they didn't know how to do it. As Iowa-CCI members continued to examine the complaint process, we found it was a process plagued by ambiguity, intimidation, and inefficiency.

After five months of requesting a meeting with the DMPD Chief of Police, he finally agreed to meet with us. Our goal was to share our ideas with him on how to improve the process of filing a complaint against the DMPD and to point out its pitfalls. We suggested the forms should be online *and* in print, offered in Spanish as well as English, and set with clear timing expectations for responses. We had a list of additional suggestions, but after two meetings, the DMPD grew tired of our persistence and refused to meet with us any further.

Our attention then turned to the ineffective and unjust practice of racial profiling. We knew it was happening all too often in Des Moines because we heard the stories—the voices of Black men especially—who had fallen victim to racial profiling. While the Police Chief denied that his officers profiled, we continued to collect story after story. Eventually, a retired attorney joined our racial justice team at Iowa-CCI and shared with us his 4 years of personal research on the arrests and citations issued by the DMPD to people of color. He, too, had been interviewing racial profiling victims for some years.

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His research was gathered from the Polk County Sheriff's Department, the Iowa Department of Transportation, and DMPD records based on requests filed under the Freedom of Information Act. He had his data analyzed by a qualified statistician. We now had data to match our stories, which proved that:

- 28.5% of all Black people living in Des Moines received citations, yet make up only 11% of the population. Compare that to white people—who make up 75% of the population in Des Moines—of which only 12% receive citations.¹
- Black people are 6.2 times more likely to be arrested for interference with official acts than white people.²
- Black people are 4.5 times more likely to be arrested for speeding than white people.³
- Black people are 3.2 times more likely to be issued a citation for an equipment violation than white people.⁴

We needed more stories, so we organized the community. In the Summer of 2018, we held three community meetings to get people involved in exposing and solving the problem. If things were going to change, it had to be from the ground up and led by community input. We provided a platform; they provided the power.

Nearly 400 folks attended the three meetings. We also invited three members of the City Council to attend the meetings and hear from the community. By the Fall, we crafted a proposal, based on community input, for consideration by the Des Moines city government (Mayor, City Council, and City Manager). The community was steadfast in their belief that the police work for us and that it is a conflict to expect them to “police” themselves. We also felt strongly that accountability, equity, and transparency in policing are critical for public safety, building trust, and fostering relationships. In addition to being traumatic, racially biased policing is also ineffective at reducing crime.

Our community formulated a demand for an ordinance; a law change for Des Moines that **prohibited racial profiling** along with five other key provisions:

1. A ban on pretextual stops.
2. A mandate on data collection on all stops, and release of that data to the public annually.

¹ *Our Data*, JUST VOICES, [https://perma.cc/YA9S-H5TK] (last visited May 5, 2021).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

3. The creation of a citizen's review board to review and investigate complaints against the police.
4. Annual training for officers on implicit bias, cultural competency, and de-escalation tactics.
5. Making marijuana possession a low-level enforcement priority.⁵

We took our concerns about racial profiling to the Des Moines City Council for the first time in April 2018. In November that year, we came back with the community-generated proposed ordinance. It took five appearances at City Council meetings and four appearances at the Des Moines Civil & Human Rights Commission meetings—spanning over two and a half years—to make some real progress. We engaged and involved the community in all efforts and turned the city council chambers into a standing-room-only space every time. We engaged citizens with letter-writing and phone calls to city council members urging them to sign petitions, and leveraged the power of social media to raise awareness, educate, and engage our neighbors in the fight.

In January 2020, we formed an alliance with other organizations, like the Des Moines NAACP and the ACLU of Iowa, to add weight and pressure, and create solidarity around our efforts to get our proposed ordinance passed. While negotiating with the city manager, there was much disagreement on what provisions the ordinance would contain.

Then George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police. Protests sprung up across the nation and in Des Moines too. It took his tragic death to compel city leadership to finally pass an ordinance banning what they chose to call “biased policing”. This was in June 2020.

The final ordinance did not include all the provisions the community had demanded back in November 2018, but it was a start. For example, city leaders would not include a ban on pre-textual stops nor a citizens review board. As for data collection on all traffic stops (not just those resulting in a citation or arrest), they agreed to issue an RFP (request for proposal) to hire a consultant to do a study on the best data collection methods and tools the DMPD should adopt. Finally, while not agreeing to make marijuana possession a low-level priority, they did form a task force to study marijuana enforcement. They also agreed that 3 community members could serve on the task force. Their recommendations were due in November 2020.

The Racial Justice Team at Iowa-CCI is determined to monitor and hold the DMPD accountable for obeying the ordinance while we continue to press for its expansion. We don't give up. I've learned that there is something

⁵ See Austin Cannon, ‘*Astoundingly Disrespectful*’: Residents Pan Des Moines’ Racial Profiling Proposal, DES MOINES REG. (Jun. 19, 2019, 8:43 AM), [<https://perma.cc/NH6T-8UUS>].

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productive I can do with my rage over racially-biased policing. I've learned that community organizing is a powerful and effective strategy to make social change. I've learned that we, the people, are empowered to make positive and justified change in Iowa and in America. History proves it, and now I've seen it.

